Contra Costa County Historical Society

BULLETIN

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HISTORY OF EARLY WATER TRANSPORT IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

River steamer Ft. Bragg stands by at Old River levee berth to load onions. Note Japanese workers all wearing calf-length boots.

How early steamboats carried freight and passengers on the waterways between San Francisco and Sacramento will be told in an all-member dinner meeting, February 3, 1977, at the Concord Elks Club.

Brian Thompson, tour narrator on the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers, a former transportation executive and a trustee of the California Historical Society, will relate the life and times of now-forgotten water carriers which plied the Delta country and called at Contra Costa river points before the eras of the train and auto.

Complimenting the evening's program will be a display of historical posters, photographs, timetables and other memorabila of riverboating in yesteryear. First Vice President Louis Stein will serve as program chairman.

The steamboat in California, as appropriately pointed out by author Jerry MacMullen, was born of the Gold Rush. Diggers for the glittery in the Mother Lode were far removed from civilization and steam-powered vessels brought them news, food and supplies from San Francisco.

The first steamer on record to make the upriver voyage from the San Francisco Bay, according to McMullen, was the insignificant little 37-foot-long, 9-foot-wide **Sitka**, in 1847. Russian built, but sold to William A. Leidesdorff, the San Francisco merchant, the

Sitka sailed up the Sacramento River to Sutter's New Helvetica in the less than memorable speed of six days and seven hours. On her return trip a team of oxen beat her to Benicia by the embarrassing margin of four days. Next year a heavy blow caught her and she sank in the Bay.

Inland liners more worthy of the trade soon took her place. The water artery to the gold country became a raceway for freight and passenger service as competitive lines strived for a larger share of the growing traffic. Passenger cabins may not always have been commodious and luxurious but, typically, voyagers were grandly spoiled with meals fit for a king. And if one became surfeited with the cuisine, he could while away his time with a friendly bottle or at a game of chance or, as frequently was the case, with both.

Most posh of the earliest steamers was the **Senator,** a paddlewheeler that sailed alternately on the riverways and down the coast. The **Antelope**, one of the fleetest ships in the river trade, acquired a modicum of fame as the host carrier for the first Pony Express rider in 1860.

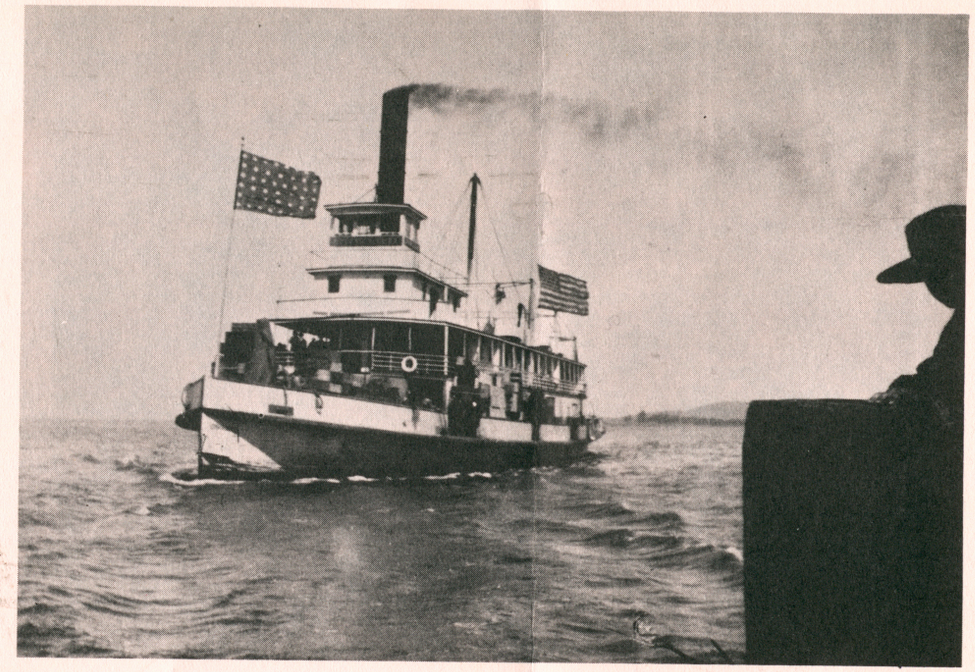
One of the companies which specialized in service to Contra Costa was Gillpatrick's Express, operating the **Parthenius**, which called at Vallejo, Benicia, Martinez, Black Diamond Landing, Pittsburg, Landing and Antioch, connecting with stages for Somersville, Nortonville and Clayton.

The Selby Smelter had a riverboat, the **Bullion**, and the Hercules Powder Co. operated a vessel for carrying dynamite, called, of course, the **Hercules**.

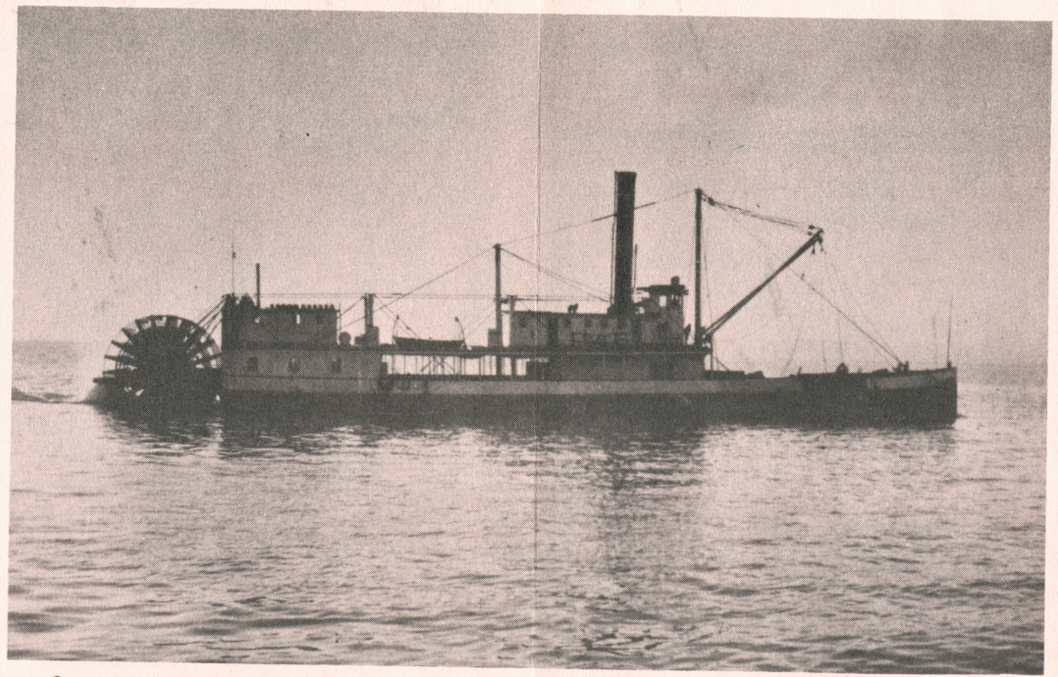
How these and other vessels on the busy waterways of Contra Costa County plied their trade and the conveniences–and inconveniences–they offered commercial customers and passengers will be the topic of an interesting dinner meeting.

In 1875, before the railroads had laid their competitive tracks, steamboats were the prime means of transport for thrifty Contra Costa businessmen. Here is a description of a consignment to New York Landing for Joel Clayton from San Francisco, via the steamer, **Parthenius**, December 9, 1875:

3½ bbls Sugar	1 box Sal Soda
3 cases Oysters	1 box Split Peas
1 bbl Codfish	1 keg Syrup
1 kip Mackerel	1 box Meats
2 boxes Starch	1 keg Nails
1 case Crackers	1 pkg Tea
1 case Merchandise	2 boxes Candles
1 case Soap	1bag Coffee
4 sacks Beans	2 sacks Alfalfa Seed
1 sack Corn Meal	1 Pump & Valve
4 sacks Spuds	3 lengths Pipe
2 sacks Oil Cake Meal	



Steamer Onward approaches river pier in Delta country.



Owned by the Hercules Powder Co., the steamer Hercules carried a load of 12,000 cases of dynamite from the Contra Costa powder works to sea-going ships anchored in San Francisco Bay northwest of Yerba Buena Island.

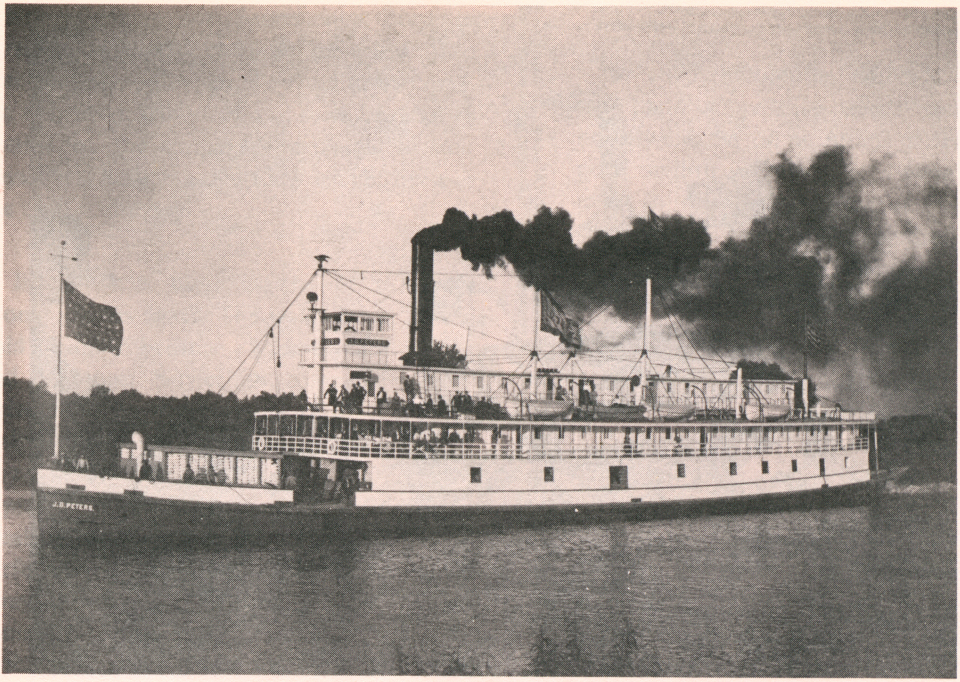
GUEST SPEAKER

Brian Thompson is a well-known railroad and transportation buff who resides in Castro Valley. His topic will be "Early Steamboat Transportation in Contra Costa County."

Mr. Thompson is a graduate of the University of California and a Navy veteran of World War II. He is the former owner of the Eastshore Charter Lines, a passenger bus operation of the East Bay.

For many years he served as vice chairman of the Pacific Coast Chapter of the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society, and serves as narrator of the society's Sacramento and San Joaquin River tours.

He is a director of the Sacramento Trust for Historical Preservation, which is currently concerned with the development of a railroad museum on the waterfront of Old Sacramento.



The J.D. Peters owned by the California Navigation and Imp. Co. was a handsome passenger and freight vessel, plying the river waters between San Francisco and Stockton, departing each day at 6 a.m. The vessel's name flag, amidship, had a white field with blue borders and red lettering.

LAFAYETTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P. O. BOX 133
LAFAYETTE, CA 94549

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MEMBERSHIP MEETING

DINNER & PROGRAM

Speaker: Brian Thompson
Historian and
River Tour Narrator

Date: February 3, 1977

Place: Concord Elks Club
3994 Willow Pass Road
Concord

Time: 7:00 p.m., No-host cocktails
7:30 p.m., Dinner, $6.00

Reservations: J.B. Jory, Secretary
P.O. Box 190
Martinez, CA 94553

COME ONE! COME ALL!